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## THE CONTINUING STRENGTH OF THE ITALIAN COMMUNIST PARTY

The 7 June national elections are generally expected to show a slight loss for the Communist Party in comparison with its 1948 vote. However, the allied Nenni Socialist Party with which it is linked in a unity-of-action pact is expected to make corresponding gains. In any event, these two parties are likely once again to poll about one third of the total popular vote, leaving the De Gasperi government with a very slim popular majority.

Continued strength by the extreme left was indicated in the 1951-52 local elections, when the Communists and Nenni Socialists together won almost 35 percent of the vote, an increase of about four percent over their showing in 1948. This gain is attributed largely to the Nenni Socialists. Communist Party membership has fallen from about 2,000,000 in 1948 to 1,500,000 now, and several important Communist deputies have left the party. Furthermore, the size of the Communist-dominated labor confederation has been reduced from about 5,000,000 to 3,500,000 members, and the Communists have become increasingly less able to pull support for political strikes. Nevertheless, they have maintained their prestige as champions of labor by keeping the initiative in promoting successful strikes on economic issues.

As they face the 1953 elections, the Communists are in a position to draw the protest vote deriving from a climate of frustration based not only on economic problems such as unemployment, low pay and inadequate land reform, but also on political issues. The steady drift of the government to the right since the 1948 elections, the unpopular new electoral law, the proposed measures restricting labor and freedom of press and assembly, and failure to crack down hard against the old and new fascists have tended to reduce the government's popularity among voters of the left and center. Moreover, many voters feel that the government is increasingly dominated by the right wing of the Christian Democratic party and subject to the influence of Catholic Action chief Luigi Gedda, who has called De Gasperi "too democratic."

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The Communists' already popular "peace" campaign also stands to benefit from the recent conciliatory moves of the Soviet Union and the increase in anti-American feeling which has developed since 1948 as a result of US tariff restrictions and Italy's political and physical relations with NATO. Moreover, many voters fear that military preparations will lead to war or at least to a reduction of social reform measures.

So far, popular reaction to the electoral campaigns has been generally apathetic. The Communists appear to have held more rallies than the other parties, though generally without a large attendance. Their posters are more numerous, and they are waging a more vigorous door-to-door campaign than the others. Because the Communists are already strong in the industrial north of Italy, they appear to be concentrating their efforts in the more conservative south. In Sicily, Communist meetings have been marked by a lack of enthusiasm similar to that which showed up at the rallies of other parties in the area. Although in parts of southern Italy Communists en masse have torn up party cards and joined the Christian Democrats, there have been indications that these defectors nevertheless intend to vote Communist.

The Communists' campaign is expected to be materially aided by their front group, the National Democratic Alliance, which is made up of fellow-travellers previously connected with various non-Communist parties. This group stresses the neutrality theme in an effort to wipe out the one or two percent edge on which the center parties may depend for a majority.

Because under the new electoral law even such a bare margin of victory would ensure the winning bloc two-thirds of the seats in the lower house, Communist strength is expected to be reduced in the Chamber of Deputies. The law does not affect the seats in the Senate, however, and there it is possible that the Social-Communists may win enough strength that, together with the extreme rightist parties, they will be able to block government-sponsored legislation.